

British History Series: Episode 3 - The Dark Ages and the Fall of Roman Britain

Presented by Chris Green

Key Points Covered:

1. The End of Roman Britain (410 AD):

- The Roman Empire withdrew from Britain in 410 AD, leaving the island vulnerable to invasions.
- Emperor Honorius told the Britons to "defend themselves," effectively abandoning them.
- Britain descended into chaos, with towns and villas falling into disrepair.

2. Invasions and Settlements:

- **Saxons, Picts, and Irish Pirates:** After the Romans left, Britain faced attacks from Saxons (from Germany), Picts (from Scotland), and Irish pirates (Scotti).
- **Saxon Settlements:** By the 430s, Saxons began settling in eastern Britain, bringing their pagan culture and cremation practices.
- **Angles and Jutes:** The Angles settled in the Humber region, while the Jutes settled in Kent and the Isle of Wight.

3. The Rise of Warlords and Petty Kingdoms:

- With no central authority, Britain fragmented into small kingdoms ruled by warlords.
- **Vortigern:** A high king in the southeast, Vortigern invited Saxon mercenaries (Hengist and Horsa) to help fight the Picts. However, the Saxons eventually turned on the Britons and began invading.
- **Ambrosius Aurelianus:** A Romano-British leader who may have led resistance against the Saxons. Some historians suggest he could be the basis for the King Arthur legend.

4. The Legend of King Arthur:

- The story of King Arthur first appeared in the 12th century, written by Geoffrey of Monmouth. However, there is little historical evidence to support his existence.
- Arthur is often associated with the Battle of Mount Badon, where he supposedly defeated the Saxons. However, this is likely a mix of myth and legend.

5. The Anglo-Saxon Takeover:

- By the 6th century, Anglo-Saxon kingdoms like Wessex, Sussex, and Essex were established.
- The Britons were pushed westward into Wales and Cornwall, with some fleeing to Brittany in France.
- **Ethnic Transfer:** Over time, the Anglo-Saxon culture and language became dominant, but there is evidence that many Britons intermarried with the invaders, leading to a blending of cultures.

6. The Dark Ages:

- The period from 410 to 600 AD is often called the "Dark Ages" due to the lack of written records.
- The main sources of information come from monks like Gildas, Bede, and the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, but these were written centuries after the events and are often biased or mixed with legend.

Key Figures Mentioned:

- **Vortigern:** A high king who invited Saxon mercenaries to Britain, only for them to turn against the Britons.
- **Ambrosius Aurelianus:** A Romano-British leader who may have led resistance against the Saxons.
- **Hengist and Horsa:** Saxon brothers who initially came as mercenaries but later became invaders.
- **King Arthur:** A legendary figure who may have been based on a real leader, but much of his story is myth.
- **Urien of Rheged:** A British warrior who fought against the Anglo-Saxons in the north but was eventually betrayed and assassinated.

Key Events:

- **410 AD:** Rome abandons Britain, leaving it to defend itself.
 - **430s AD:** Saxons begin settling in eastern Britain.
 - **477 AD:** Ella establishes the Kingdom of the South Saxons (Sussex).
 - **495 AD:** Cerdic establishes the Kingdom of the West Saxons (Wessex).
 - **577 AD:** The Battle of Dyrham cuts off the Britons in the southwest from those in Wales.
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Questions from the Audience:

Q: What happened to the families of captured leaders like Caratacus?

A: While Roman history is often written by the victors, there's no record of Caratacus' family being killed. It's likely they were spared, as Caratacus himself was allowed to live in Rome. The Romans often used captured leaders as political tools, so it's probable that his family was treated similarly, possibly being held as hostages or integrated into Roman society.

Q: Were there any Roman structures like the Colosseum built in Britain?

A: Yes, there were Roman structures in Britain, though not on the scale of the Colosseum. For example, there was an amphitheater in **Chester** and a theater in **Verulamium** (modern-day St. Albans). Additionally, parts of the Roman walls surrounding London still exist, though much of what remains today is medieval. The British climate, with its damp weather, has not been kind to ancient ruins, so many Roman structures have not survived as well as those in drier regions like North Africa.

Q: What was the Minack Theatre, and was it built during the Roman period?

A: The Minack Theatre in Cornwall is a more recent construction and has no connection to the Roman period. However, Cornwall was significant during the Dark Ages, particularly around **Tintagel**, which was a trading hub even after the Romans left. Archaeological evidence shows that Tintagel was still trading with Europe 60 years after the Romans departed, with items like olive oil and wine being imported.

Q: How did the Anglo-Saxons manage to take over a population of 2 million Britons?

A: The traditional view is that the Anglo-Saxons invaded and wiped out the Britons, but archaeological evidence suggests a more gradual process. The Anglo-Saxons likely took control of local areas and became the ruling elite, while many Britons remained and intermarried with the newcomers. Over time, the Anglo-Saxon culture and language became dominant, but this was more through cultural assimilation than outright genocide. Additionally, factors like famine and plague may have weakened the Britons, making it easier for the Anglo-Saxons to establish themselves.

Q: Was King Arthur a real historical figure?

A: The historical evidence for King Arthur is scant. He first appears in writings by **Geoffrey of Monmouth** in the 12th century, nearly 600 years after the events he is said to have been involved in. While there may have been a real leader who inspired the Arthurian legends, the stories of his 12 battles and the Knights of the Round Table are likely embellishments. Some historians

suggest that figures like **Ambrosius Aurelianus** or **Urien of Rheged** may have inspired the Arthurian tales, but there is no definitive proof.

Next Week's Topic: The Growth of Anglo-Saxon England

- The consolidation of small Anglo-Saxon tribes into larger kingdoms.
 - The rise of Northumbria and Mercia.
 - The return of Christianity to England.
 - The arrival of a new threat: the Vikings.
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Thank you for joining us! See you next week for more fascinating stories from British history!

Note: This handout is based on the closed captions from the talk and is designed to provide a concise summary for those who missed the session or want to revisit the key points.

Series presented by Chris Green, 2025.